

Review: At LACMA's 'Helen Pashgian,' step back and watch magic happen



Helen Pashgian, "Untitled, 2012-13," at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. (Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

By David Pagel
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Snobs often say that it's wrong to stroll through a museum without stopping to study a single work of art. They have a point -- today we tend to do things too quickly. But there's more than one way to look at great art, and scrutinizing every little detail may not be the best way to perceive everything out there.

It certainly isn't when you visit "Helen Pashgian: Light Invisible" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. To fully engage the subtly mesmerizing installation, organized by curator Carol S. Eliel, you must stroll slowly around the perimeter of the long, darkened gallery in which its 12 approximately 8-foot-tall cylindrical sculptures have been installed.

They stand, equidistant from one another, in a row. Made of semi-translucent plastic, which resembles the frosted glass often found on shower doors, Pashgian's hollow forms appear to be illuminated from within and to contain one or more geometric forms, each tinted a color of the spectrum.

To stand and stare at only one is a lot like looking at a movie still and thinking you're seeing the whole movie. With Pashgian's multi-part piece of unscripted, participatory theater, the magic happens when you step back and stroll, treating all 12 cylindrical sculptures as one.

As you move, your eyes glide through the darkness, drawn on by a flickering glimmer far across the room, by a gentle glow down low, or by some soft luminosity that may have been there the whole time or may have just emerged from the shadows.

There's nothing high-tech or flashy or sensationalistic about Pashgian's installation. Despite its architectural setting, synthetic materials and space-age appearance, its overall impact is organic, fluid, endless. That's because, as a sculptor, the material Pashgian shapes is your mind.